

Pipeline officials try to assuage fears

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Tucson Citizen

Despite the July 30 pipeline rupture that spilled thousands of gallons of gasoline on a West Side neighborhood, incidents of pipeline ruptures and leaks have decreased in recent years, a federal official told Tucsonans last night.

Stacy Gerard, assistant administrator for the U.S. Department of Transportation's Office of Pipeline Safety, said the agency has been working for three years to raise the inspection and safety standards pipeline operators must meet. This came in response to a series of leaks and spills in the mid-1990s in pipelines that had passed inspections.

"If compliant companies are having incidents happen, there's something wrong with the regulations," she said.

Gerard addressed about 90 people at El Rio Neighborhood Center as part of a forum on pipeline safety organized by the Arizona Corporation Commission. Federal, state and local officials briefed residents about pipeline inspections and clean-up efforts in Tucson since the spill contaminated groundwater.

Gerard said efforts by the Office of Pipeline Safety have begun to pay off.

"The trends in pipeline safety figures over the past few years are improving," she said.

She said the importance of pipeline safety has been recognized by Washington.

"Congress doesn't usually choose to grow agencies that are not performing. In a time when government is shrinking, we're the fastest-growing agency within the Department of Transportation," Gerard said. She noted that the office is five times the size it was a decade ago.

The ACC is one of a handful of state regulatory agencies that inspect interstate pipelines on behalf of the federal government, though regulators have said they would like to see the state have a larger role.

"This state would like to do more, but we have to make sure there's enough money to fund the basic programs nationwide," Gerard said.

Despite improved practices and standards, Gerard said, the stress corrosion cracking that caused the Kinder Morgan Energy Partners' pipeline to rupture could not have been predicted with current technology.

"No matter how many inspections were done on the Kinder Morgan pipeline, until we have an instrument to go inside that size pipeline to analyze it, you're never going to find this problem," Gerard said.

To that end, the office has created a technology program to improve inspection devices, she said.

City Councilman Steve Leal told commissioners that local safety agencies should have access to information about potential pipeline problems so they can make informed public safety decisions.

"It is not adequate for our Fire Department to be given training on how to respond for when it goes to hell," he said.

Pat Brandenburg, who lives three houses away from the pipeline and near Pima Community College, said more should be done to move the pipeline out of populated areas.

"I don't just want to talk about it being safe where it is. I want to talk about it being in a new place," she said.

Residents also worried about a 6-inch pipe that runs parallel to the failed gasoline pipeline.

Commissioner William Mundell pressed a Kinder Morgan executive on whether the company had plans to replace that line, which is also nearly 50 years old.

Jerry Engelhardt, spokesman for regulatory and legislative issues for Kinder Morgan, said the company had no plans to replace it.

"With regards to the 6-inch line, there tends to be the assumption that old is bad," he said. Kinder Morgan operates lines that are 80 to 85 years old in other areas, he said.

Commissioner Kristin Mayes bristled at Engelhardt's statement, saying she is pushing for an independent lab test of the sections of failed pipeline to determine whether age was a contributing factor in the gasoline spill .